

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 15, 2021

The Honorable Xavier Becerra
Secretary
Department of Health & Human Services
200 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Rochelle P. Walensky, MD, MPH
Office of the Director
Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention
1600 Clifton Road, NE
Atlanta, GA 30333

Dear Secretary Becerra and Dr. Walensky,

We are writing to recommend the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) facilitate a summer campaign to increase the COVID-19 vaccination rate within the rural farmworker community, through a collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) network. The population of rural, low-income farmworkers serves as the backbone to the nation's food chain, yet, these farmworkers have historically faced many health care disparities and have been particularly hard-hit by the current COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, in agriculturally rich states, the COVID-19 hospitalization and death rates have been disproportionately high.

As Secretary, you have been bold and creative in your approach to increasing access to the COVID-19 vaccine, including partnering with the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to direct vaccines to residents of public housing properties and homeless shelters. We are asking you to exercise that same vision to also direct vaccines to organizations serving farmworker families to ensure no break in America's food supply chain.

The national network of MSHS programs not only provides high-quality early education and other comprehensive (health, dental, educational, etc.) services to farmworker parents and young children, but also operates as a trusted resource hub for farmworker families and the community. A survey conducted by the National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association (NMSHSA) in May 2021 revealed that under 25% of farmworker families enrolled in MSHS programs had been vaccinated. This low rate is alarming and problematic as we enter summer months when demand for agricultural labor and MSHS services are at their peak. When the pandemic first broke, the NMSHSA helped MSHS grantees across the country stay informed and connected via town halls with MSHS personnel and farmworker parents. We know there are barriers that stand in the way of farmworkers accessing the COVID-19 vaccine – including lack of access to transportation, lack of interpreters, non-traditional work

hours, and, of course, misinformation and mistrust. These are access barriers MSHS staff encounter and overcome on a regular basis working with their community partners.

As part of your efforts to ramp up innovative COVID-19 vaccination strategies across the country, we ask you to encourage the CDC to utilize the trusted relationships that the national network of 26 federally-funded MSHS programs operating in 34 states have with the farmworker community. We share a common goal to access hard-to-reach populations and to successfully vaccinate up to 20,000 essential farmworkers and eligible household adults. This access can be achieved as farmworkers enter the busiest months, and MSHS programs become fully operational to support their young children.

We are recommending that MSHS grantees be considered as a hub in a new HHS COVID-19 farmworker vaccination effort. The proximity MSHS programs have to farmworker families, the trusted relationships they foster, and the strength of the community partnerships that MSHS programs have with local community health centers, social service providers, growers, educators and other relevant partners, can be used to help reach this population.

Coordination between the CDC, the NMSHSA, and the network of MSHS programs is needed to direct federal, state, and local COVID-19 vaccination resources to farmworkers and their families. We are requesting the direction of mobile vaccination clinics, and the establishment of onsite vaccination clinics at MSHS sites over the summer in these rural, agriculturally rich communities. This will help ensure maximum access and successful vaccination of this critical portion of the agricultural workforce. The NMSHSA will work with the network of individual MSHS programs and health partners to enhance outreach efforts to make these sites a success. We are asking HHS to act swiftly and decisively in launching this effort with the goal of successfully reaching a 75% vaccination rate among farmworker families by September 30, 2021.

We appreciate the work HHS is doing to build partnerships with federal, state and local partners to make COVID-19 vaccines available to communities across the country and we believe that, through these coordinated and targeted efforts, the vaccination rate among rural farmworkers and their eligible household members will significantly increase - a win-win for the farmworker community and our nation's food supply.

Sincerely,



Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress

/s/

Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
Member of Congress

/s/

Jimmy Panetta
Member of Congress

/s/

Raul Ruiz, M.D.
Member of Congress

/s/
Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress

/s/
Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress

/s/
Pramila Jayapal
Member of Congress

/s/
Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress

/s/
Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress

/s/
Nannette Barragán
Member of Congress

/s/
Sheila Jackson Lee
Member of Congress

/s/
Darren Soto
Member of Congress

/s/
Marcy Kaptur
Member of Congress

/s/
Joe Neguse
Member of Congress

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Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress

/s/
Andy Levin
Member of Congress

/s/
Val B. Demings
Member of Congress

/s/
David N. Cicilline
Member of Congress

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Tony Cárdenas
Member of Congress

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John Garamendi
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Lucille Roybal-Allard
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Veronica Escobar
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Mark Pocan
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Julia Brownley
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Juan Vargas
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Sylvia R. Garcia
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Jahana Hayes
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Henry Cuellar
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Lisa Blunt Rochester
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Kim Schrier
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Jim Costa
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Earl Blumenauer
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James P. McGovern
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/s/

Judy Chu
Member of Congress